CONCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL RELATIONS AND PRAGMATICS RESEARCH

Helen Spencer-Oatey

Journal of Pragmatics, 20 (1993), 27–47

1. Introduction

Most, if not all, research within pragmatics is based on the premise that social relations affect communicative interaction, and that people use information about interpersonal relations in the production and interpretation of language. So in experimental investigations of language use, subjects are frequently presented with brief vignettes that specify the role relations of the interlocutors; for example:

> You are planning an office party. You invite your boss, the clerk who works under you, and your good friend, a fellow employee. You request that each of your guests come unaccompanied by his wife.
>
> Scarcella, 1980:277

The aim of such research is typically to explore the association between linguistic choice and contextual features, so that the relationship between the two can be explicated. However, the validity of this research depends on the accuracy of an implicit assumption: that all subjects will assess the contextual factors in similar ways.

In this paper I explore the validity of this assumption. I focus on two aspects of social relations: power and distance. After reviewing some relevant theory and research, I report an experimental investigation of the extent to which people from two cultures (Chinese and British) hold similar conceptions of one type of role relationship (tutor - postgraduate student). The results indicate that people from different socio-cultural groups may hold differing norms regarding the power and distance of a given role relationship, and so I argue that, whenever possible, researchers should include assessment checks of people's perceptions of these variables. Other implications of the results are also discussed.

2. Language Use and Conceptions of Social Relations

According to Stern (1983:134-5), one of the main problems facing linguistics this century has been to explicate the relationship between language and situational context. A major focus of concern has been the identification of relevant features of the situation, and numerous taxonomies have been suggested. Two of the most well known are those proposed by Hymes (1974) and by Brown and Fraser (1979).

Hymes (1974) has suggested the mnemonic *SPEAKING* to summarize the important factors that affect the inter-relationship between language and context: *Setting, Participants, Ends, Act, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, Genre*. As can be seen, he identifies *`participants'* as a significant factor.

Brown and Fraser (1979), in their taxonomy of relevant situational components, also include `*participants*' as an important variable. Their specification of this feature is particularly detailed, and draws attention to two key aspects: the relationship between the participants, and the personal characteristics of the individuals. Their taxonomy of this aspect of the situational context is illustrated below:

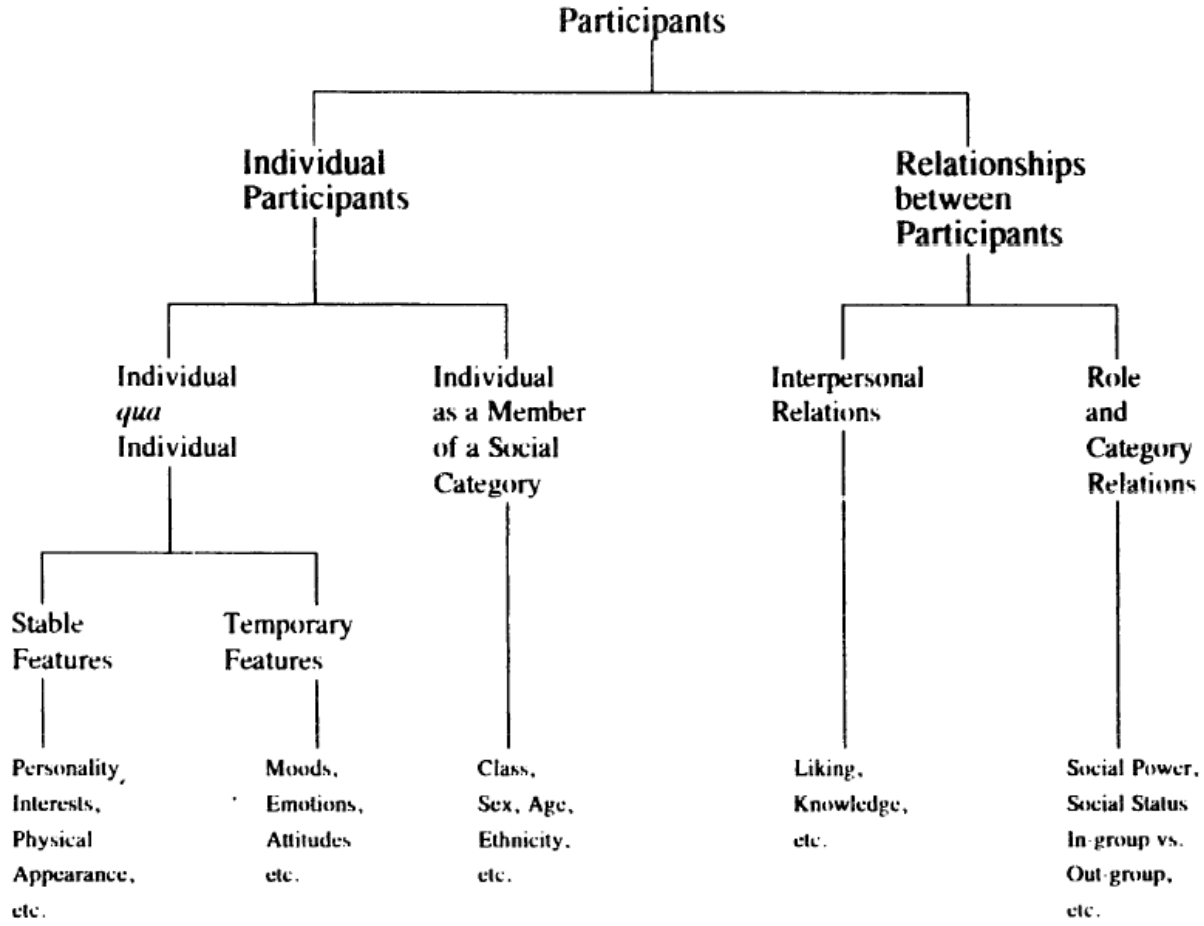


Figure 1: Brown and Fraser's (1979) Taxonomy of Situational Factors that relate to Participants

In pragmatics, attention is often focussed on the role and category relations of the participants, and two dimensions that are frequently referred to are the *power* and *distance* relations of the participants. For example, Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), in their model of politeness, suggest that interlocutors consider the power and distance of their relationship when calculating the degree of face- threat associated with a given act. Similarly, Leech (1983) maintains that these two parameters are highly relevant to politeness.

Empirically, there is a large amount of evidence suggesting an association between language use and power and distance relations. Most of the studies have focussed on particular speech acts, such as requests (e.g. Baxter, 1984; Blum-Kulka et al, 1985; Blum-Kulka &

House, 1989; Holtgraves & Yang, 1990; Lim & Bowers, 1991), apologies (e.g. Holmes, 1990; Olshtain, 1989; Vollmer & Olshtain, 1989), directives (e.g. Holtgraves et al, 1989), and disagreement and the giving of embarrassing information (e.g. Beebe & Takahashi, 1989). In addition, there has been a limited amount of work on conversations (e.g. Cansler & Stiles, 1981).

In nearly all of these studies, an association has emerged between language use and the power and distance relations of the participants. For example, Holtgraves and Yang (1990), investigated requesting behaviour among Americans and Koreans, and found that for both nationality groups, `bald' (unmitigated) requests were associated with the greatest amounts of distance and of speaker power, and that off-record hints were associated with the lowest ratings of speaker power. Similarly, Beebe and Takahashi (1989) found that power relations affected the ways in which Americans express disagreement.

Taking the research as a whole, it seems that the effect of power is somewhat more pervasive than that of distance, and that there may also be an interaction effect. For example, Blum-Kulka et al (1985) found that distance had a significant effect on the choice of directness in requests when the interlocutors were equal in power, but not when there was a power differential. Much more research is needed to clarify such issues, and also to provide more details of how these parameters affect different linguistic choices, and under what circumstances. However, the evidence to date indicates that both power and distance typically have an important effect on the production and interpretation of language.

3. Power and Distance: Conceptual Issues

Despite the numerous investigations into the effects of participant relations on language use, there are some important conceptual issues that are often overlooked.

Firstly, as Wierzbicka (1991) points out, linguists have given inadequate attention to the precise definition of key pragmatic parameters, such as *power* and *distance*. These concepts have been used very widely, but different researchers have often used the same terms to refer to slightly different concepts, frequently failing to give clear definitions or explanations of their interpretations.

Secondly, there has been a tendency to assume that all respondents will interpret the situational factors in similar ways. Researchers have often failed to check on respondents' perceptions of situations, and simply assumed that the researcher's perceptions of the different situations are the same as the perceptions of the respondents.

This paper particularly addresses the second issue. For a further discussion of the first issue, see Spencer-Oatey, 1992.

4. Variability among People's Conceptions of Social Relations

When researchers explore the association between language use and variables such as *power* and *distance*, it is vital that they obtain accurate assessments of these variables, because the investigators' conceptions may differ from those of the subjects, and the

validity of the results could thus be affected. Cody and McLaughlin (1980) warn about this:

> Researchers are cautioned against attempts at *a priori* classification of situations on these factors without assessing how the subjects perceive the situations. Mischel found that perceptions of subjects and experimenters may be discrepant ...
>
> Cody & McLaughlin, 1980:147

Further evidence for the danger of relying completely on investigators' judgments is provided by the following studies. Holtgraves (1986) found that for 3 out of 11 scenarios, subjects did not perceive them as he had intended, and so he had to discard these scenarios. Lim and Bowers (1991) found that subjects did not perceive the manipulation of the power variable as being as great as intended, and they concluded that this could have affected their results. And Wood and Kroger (1991), when analysing their results, had to consider the possibility that they had misclassified some of their dyads on the dimensions of *power* and *distance*.

In some of the empirical studies referred to in section 2 (especially those carried out within the fields of human communication and social psychology), the experimenters included a manipulation check: they administered an extra test to check whether the subjects perceived the situational differences as intended. But other researchers (e.g. Trosberg, 1987; Wood & Kroger, 1991; Holmes, 1990; Blum-Kulka et al, 1985) simply used their own judgments. So in these cases the validity of their findings can be questioned.

In cross-cultural research, this issue is even more crucial because variability among people's conceptions (for example, between respondents who are members of different socio-cultural groups, and between investigators and subjects who are from different socio-cultural groups) is likely to be even greater, as the following studies suggest.

Hill et al (1986) asked Japanese and American subjects to rate brief descriptions of people in situations (eg *A clerk in a post office*) according to the degree of politeness that such social situations demand. They found that Japanese subjects' ratings exhibited a greater range than American subjects' ratings, and that there were some minor differences in the ordering of the situations. Two interpretations of these findings are possible: a) that Japanese and Americans perceive the relationship between interlocutors in a given situation in the same way, but that they have differing norms as to how polite one should be in that situation; b) that Japanese and Americans perceive the relationship between the interlocutors in a given situation somewhat differently.

Tentative support for the latter interpretation is provided by Vollmer and Olshtain (1989) and Olshtain (1989). Focussing on apologies in various contexts, they obtained ratings from German and Hebrew native speakers respectively, concerning various aspects of the social context: social power, familiarity, severity of offence, and the obligation to apologize. The apology situations were identical for both groups of assessors, which allows us to explore whether there were any cross-cultural differences in the perceptions. The figures were as follows:

		S2	S4	S6	S8	S10	S12	S14
Distance:	H	2.1	1.99	1.0	1.0	3.0	1.0	2.68
	G	1.52	1.77	1.0	1.05	2.79	1.2	2.27
Power:	H	2.9	1.08	2.6	1.9	2.0	1.96	2.0
	G	2.65	1.47	2.82	1.45	1.97	1.95	2.05

Key: S2, S4 etc. = situation 2, situation 4 etc.
H = Hebrew; G = German
Distance ratings: 1 = strangers; 2 = acquaintances; 3 = friends
Power ratings: 1 = Speaker lower than hearer
2 = Speaker and hearer equal
3 = Speaker higher than hearer

Table 1: Mean Ratings of Perceived Degree of Relationship Distance and Power for Different Situations
(based on Vollmer & Olshtain, 1989; Olshtain, 1989)[1]

According to Kasper (1990), the figures exhibit `marked differences in the power attributed by Germans and Israelis to addressees in identical social roles' (Kasper, 1990:202). Unfortunately, it is only possible to form a subjective judgment based on the figures above, because no statistical analyses are reported as to whether the differences are statistically significant. However, superficially, it seems that some of the German and Hebrew ratings are very similar, and that others are rather different.

Empirically, therefore, there is tentative support for the possibility that people's perceptions of social relations may vary cross-culturally. However, to the best of my knowledge, no detailed research has specifically attempted to explore this issue.[2] In the remainder of this article, therefore, I report an empirical investigation into British and Chinese conceptions of the nature of one type of role relationship (tutor - postgraduate student).

PRESENT RESEARCH

5. Conceptual Issues

The aim of the present research was to find out whether people from different nationality groups are likely to hold different conceptions of a given role relationship. I used British and Chinese subjects, and explored their conceptions of the tutor - postgraduate (henceforth, PG) student relationship. I concentrated on the *role* relationship, and attempted to probe people's prototypical conceptions of this type of relationship. Clearly, in real life, a wide

[1] The figures quoted are adjusted figures. Vollmer and Olshtain (1989) and Olshtain (1989) used 3-point scales in both cases, but the scales were reversed in terms of what the numbers represented. I have therefore adjusted the figures, so that comparisons can be made more easily.

[2] Forgas and Bond (1985) investigated a related issue: people's conceptions of common, recurring interaction sequences known as *social episodes*. They found that people from Hong Kong and Australia had significantly different cognitive representations of the `same' social episodes.

variety of *personal* factors also influence people's assessments of a given role relationship; for example, the individuals' relative age, rank, ability, length of time of acquaintance, and so on. However, in my research I ignored these additional personal factors. Much pragmatics research focusses on *role* relations, and I wanted to concentrate on people's conceptions of these roles.

I focussed on three aspects the role relationship: superordination/equality, distance/closeness, and rights and obligations. For reasons of space, I only report on the first two aspects here (see Spencer-Oatey, 1992, for full details).

5.1 Superordination/Equality

The parameter *superordination/equality* relates to the vertical or hierarchical dimension of interpersonal relations; in other words, to conceptions of equality and inequality in relationships. Some linguists refer to this dimension as *power* (eg Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987; Hudson, 1980; Brown & Gilman, 1960), and others as *authority* (eg Leech, 1983). The term *power* draws attention to the notion of potential influence, and this is how Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) define the dimension; the term *authority*, on the other hand, stresses the *right* to influence. However, when people show deference to others (which as Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) point out, reflects a differential on this dimension), factors such as prestige, respect, status, power, and authority, all seem to be inextricably involved. And in most pragmatics research, the dimension has simply been interpreted as equality or lack of equality between speaker and hearer. So in my present research, I explored the general notion of hierarchy in interpersonal relations.

Benjamin's (1974) model of social behaviour implies that superordination is associated with the notion of asymmetry, and Brown and Gilman (1960) and Leech (1983) also point out this association. It seems that the greater the differential in hierarchical relations, the greater the degree of asymmetry in interpersonal behaviour. So in devising a means of measuring the extent to which tutors are regarded as superordinate to PG students, I drew on this notion of asymmetry. (See section 6.2 for further details.)

5.2 Social Distance/Closeness

If *superordination/equality* is the vertical dimension of interpersonal relations, *social distance/closeness* can be seen as the horizontal dimension. Roger Brown (1965) describes it as follows:

> In every human society there is some conception of differential solidarity. Men everywhere understand what is meant by such a question as: "Who are the people whose welfare is of great importance to you and who are the people for whom you are less concerned?" ... Solidarity is often talked about in terms of being close or remote, near or far, the in-group versus the out-group.
>
> R. Brown, 1965:57

Various terms have been used for this dimension: *solidarity* (eg Brown & Gilman, 1960), *distance* (eg Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987) and *social distance* (eg Leech, 1983). And despite the fact that both psychologists and linguists often refer to the parameter, its precise nature and scope is problematic. Sometimes it is associated with affect or emotional tone, sometimes with degree of familiarity, and sometimes with both. Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) definition of *distance*, for example, allows for the inclusion of both familiarity and degree of liking; and yet, with a few exceptions (for example, Baxter, 1984: Holtgraves and Yang, 1990), in most empirical language studies it has been interpreted as degree of familiarity.

In my research, I used a framework devised by Hays (1984) for differentiating close and distant friendships. This formulation considers distance/closeness to be related to the following factors:

> *Companionship*: sharing an activity or experience together, doing something together, sharing each other's company.
> *Consideration (or utility)*: friend as `helper', providing goods, services or support; expressing concern for the other's well-being.
> *Communication (or self-disclosure)*: disclosing (verbally or non-verbally) or discussing information about oneself; exchanging ideas, facts, opinions or confidences about any topic.
> *Affection*: expressing any sentiment (positive or negative) felt towards the other, any expression of the emotional bond between partners.
>
> Hays, 1984:78

I chose this formulation because it is relatively comprehensive in scope. A definition of *distance/closeness* that was limited to familiarity would probably have been too narrow for exploring just one type of role relationship, and a definition that was based on affect would probably have been too person-specific. Moreover, this framework is suitable for probing casual as well as close relationships.[3]

6. Research Method

6.1 Overview

I explored the conceptions that four main groups of people held regarding the nature of the tutor - PG student relationship: British tutors, British PG students, Chinese tutors, Chinese PG students.[4] My principle means of data collection was a questionnaire.[5]

6.2 The Questionnaire

[3] Many psychological frameworks designed for probing closeness are aimed at intimate relationships, and thus are unsuitable for exploring tutor - PG student relations.
[4] I only investigated PG students taking a master's degree by coursework, and did not include research students. I defined tutors as follows: any academic member of staff (irrespective of rank) who teaches master's students and who has particular responsibility for certain students (for example, course tutor, dissertation supervisor, personal tutor).
[5] I also collected documentary and interview data. For reasons of space, these are not considered here.

The purpose of the questionnaire was to probe the subjects' conceptions of the following aspects of the tutor - PG student relationship:

1. The extent to which tutors are considered superordinate to PG students.

2. The degree of distance/closeness in the tutor - PG student relationship.

3. The nature and scope of tutors' and PG students' rights and obligations.

The questionnaire had an initial introductory section, where subjects were asked to provide a certain amount of background information, such as their field of specialization, approximate age, and experience of living abroad. Following this, there were four main sections. Section 1 asked subjects to provide likelihood ratings for the items probing tutor superordination and social distance/closeness (the order of these items was randomized); section 2 dealt with tutors' and PG students' duties; section 3 asked subjects to provide `closeness' ratings for the social distance/closeness items (see below for further explanation); and section 4 explored the *bases* of people's conceptions of tutor superordination (whether people regard tutors as being superordinate to students because of their academic expertise, because of their power to control important outcomes for students, and/or because of cultural beliefs in tutors' superordinate status). For reasons of space, the findings from sections 2 and 4 are not reported here (full details are given in Spencer-Oatey, 1992).

The questionnaire items were generated primarily through discussions with British and Chinese informants, and also by referring to previous cross-cultural studies. In this way, I tried to ensure that the items were maximally meaningful to respondents from both nationality groups.

In order to probe tutor superordination, I used the notion of asymmetry. Drawing on results from earlier cross-cultural studies (Triandis et al, 1968; Adamopoulos, 1982), I identified behaviours that were found to have high loadings on the factor *superordination*, and then generated pairs of items such as the following:

> *A tutor corrects a PG student over an academic matter.*
> *A PG student corrects a tutor over an academic matter.*
>
> *A tutor challenges a PG student on his/her academic viewpoint.*
> *A PG student challenges a tutor on his/her academic viewpoint.*

One member of each pair referred to tutor behaviour, and the other to PG student behaviour. There were 10 pairs of items in all (in other words, 20 individual items), and subjects rated each of the items on a 7-point scale for likelihood of occurrence. My assumption was that any difference between the likelihood of tutors performing the behaviours and that of PG students doing so would be a reflection of asymmetry in the relationship; and the greater the asymmetry, the greater the extent to which subjects regarded tutors as superordinate.

In order to probe distance/closeness, I used Hays' (1984) conceptualization as a framework, and with the help of British and Chinese informants, generated a range of items that represented behaviour typical of a *close* tutor - PG student relationship; for example:

A PG student visits his/her tutor at home.
A PG student asks a non-academic personal favour of his/her tutor (eg to borrow a household possession, etc.).
A tutor and a PG student talk to each other about their respective families.
A tutor and a PG student feel genuine, long-term concern for each other's welfare.

There were 11 such items, and I asked respondents to rate each of them (on a 7-point scale) in two ways: for likelihood of occurrence, and for the minimum degree of closeness between tutor and student for the behaviour to be regarded by both parties as appropriate.

The reasoning behind my design was as follows: if British and Chinese respondents agreed that the items described behaviour typical of *close* tutor - PG student relations, then any differences in the British and Chinese ratings of likelihood of occurrence could indicate a cultural difference in the degree of perceived closeness of the tutor - PG student relationship.[6]

Two versions of the questionnaire were produced: an English version and a Chinese version. They were developed using the principle of decentering, and using back translation and multiple translators, as recommended by Brislin (1980), so that problems of lack of equivalence could be minimised.

6.3 Procedure

311 copies of the English version of the questionnaire were distributed by internal mail to students taking taught master's courses at Lancaster University, Warwick University, and the University of Westminster. A further 95 copies were sent to academic staff who teach such students. 98 of the student copies were returned, and 68 of the tutor copies.

The Chinese version of the questionnaire was distributed in the People's Republic of China. 402 copies were distributed to 1st year Master's students and to academic staff who teach such students in various universities in Beijing and Shanghai. 120 of the student copies were returned, and 48 of the tutor copies.

In planning my sampling, I treated nationality and role as the most important variables, and so distributed the questionnaire to the following four main groups: Chinese tutors, British tutors, Chinese PG students, and British PG students. In both countries, I avoided using subjects who were specialists in linguistics and/or education, since they were less likely to

[6] I included the closeness ratings, and did not simply rely on the likelihood ratings, because I was concerned that British and Chinese subjects could have different conceptions of the `meaning' of different behaviour. For example, visiting a tutor at home could indicate closeness in Britain, but might not indicate this in China. The results suggested that there *were* some differences of this kind, and so I took them into account in my analyses.

be representative of their socio-cultural group. There were no other restrictions on the fields of study included in the sample, and the respondents' specializations covered a wide range of subjects, including the following: computing, psychology, geography, business studies, environmental studies, transport studies, engineering, and chemistry.

6.4 Discussion of Research Procedure

In this section, I discuss some procedural issues that arose in relation to my research.

According to the figures given in the last section, some of the response rates appear worryingly low, and this could raise doubts about the validity of the study.

In China, unfortunately I was unable to control the distribution of the questionnaires as carefully as I would have liked, because of the tense political situation at the time. A policy document that was then in force prohibited foreigners from administering questionnaires, and this meant that I had to use third parties to distribute them. As a result, I was unable to concentrate on just two or three universities, as in Britain: I had to give them out at a range of tertiary institutes where people were willing to help me. Some of these people later ran into difficulties in distributing all the questionnaires they had taken, and this meant that an indeterminate number of the 402 questionnaires given out were never passed on to prospective respondents: 42 were returned blank, and several people informed me verbally that they had had difficulties distributing the questionnaires. I was therefore unable to calculate a precise return rate, but the situation implies that the `true' response rate was considerably higher than the `apparent' rate of 59%.

Of the questionnaires issued to British PG students, the overall response rate was only 32%. This low figure is mainly due to an exceptionally low return rate at Warwick University, where only 11% of the questionnaires were returned. At Lancaster University, 50% were returned, and at the University of Westminster, 91% were returned. It is unclear why the rate should have been so low at Warwick University.

Obviously it is impossible to know for certain whether there is, or is not, a systematic difference between the conceptions held by people who returned the questionnaire and those who did not. However, I carried out additional analyses of variance of the British data, in which I treated place as a main effect (as well as role, field of speciality, age, and experience of living abroad), and none of the tests showed a significant effect for place. Since all three British institutions had very different response rates, this implies that the results were not significantly affected by nonresponse bias.

Another methodological issue that could affect the validity of the study is the cross-cultural comparability of the task of filling in the questionnaire. As I explained briefly above, I attempted to control for cross-cultural issues in the design and administration of the questionnaire, but it is clearly impossible to be totally certain that factors such as the respondents' familiarity with Likert-type questionnaires, their motivation, and their attitude were completely comparable. However, Campbell (1964, cited in Davidson et al, 1976) maintains that one way of checking on the influence of such extraneous factors is to design the research so that similarities can emerge as well as differences. So in the questionnaire as

a whole, I included several items that I thought would elicit similar responses from both British and Chinese respondents. These showed no significant differences for nationality, which suggests that the extraneous administrative factors were satisfactorily controlled for.

7. Results

7.1 General Analytic Procedure

The questionnaire results were analysed using two main statistical procedures: factor analysis and analysis of variance.

First, factor analyses were carried out on the items probing tutor superordination and social distance/closeness. This was to check on the design of the questionnaire: to make sure that the items were really probing the factors they were intended to measure. Separate factor analyses were carried out on the British data, the Chinese data, and the combined British and Chinese data, and all of them confirmed that the items were probing two main factors. The questionnaire items that had been designed to measure tutor superordination loaded onto one factor, and the items that had been designed to measure social distance/closeness loaded onto the other factor. I therefore concluded that the questionnaire items were indeed measuring these two variables.[7]

The factor analysis of the combined British and Chinese data was then used to obtain overall measures of the two scales (tutor superordination and social distance/closeness).[8] Two different procedures were used for this: factor analysis method and summation method. For the factor analysis method, the factor loadings were saved in an active file. This provided an overall measure of each factor which gave differential weightings to the component items, according to the strength of their loadings on the given factor.

For the summation method, the factor loadings were used to decide which items to keep and which to discard. Items with loadings of less than .5 were not retained. One item which was intended to measure distance/closeness was discarded for this reason, and also four pairs of items intended to measure tutor superordination. Then the responses to each of the usable items were summed, with equal weighting given to each of them. A reliability analysis, which examined the consistency with which the scale items measured the same underlying concept, yielded an alpha coefficient of 0.808 for the tutor superordination scale, and an alpha coefficient of 0.879 for the distance/closeness scale. These figures indicate a satisfactory degree of scale reliability.

Having obtained these two different overall measures of each factor, I then used analysis of variance to explore the effect of different independent variables on people's conceptions of

[7] The two main factors each comprised two to three sub-factors, which loaded onto their corresponding main factor when two factors were deliberately extracted from the analysis. Full details of the factor analyses are given in Spencer-Oatey, 1992.

[8] I felt justified in merging the data, since the separate analyses had confirmed that the British and Chinese respondents both conceptualized the items in terms of corresponding factors.

tutor superordination and social distance/closeness.[9] I investigated the effect of the following five factors: nationality (British and Chinese), role (tutor and PG student), field of speciality (social science and general science), experience of living abroad (those with 6 months' experience or more and those with less than 6 months' experience), and age (young, middle-aged, and older).

For field of speciality, I categorized arts and social sciences as social science; and I categorized physical sciences, natural sciences, and applied sciences as general science. For age, the questionnaire had four categories: 20's, 30's, 40's, and 50+. However, I merged the middle two categories, because they only had a small number of respondents, and their responses were more similar to each other than to either of the other two age groups. This made three categories for age: young (20's), middle-aged (30's and 40's), and older (50+).

Analyses of variance were carried out on both the factor analysis and summation measures of tutor superordination and social distance/closeness; and the results from the two procedures were almost identical. The summation measures were used for calculating means and standard deviations, because there were scaling difficulties in using the factor analysis measures.

7.2 Conceptions of Tutor Superordination

As I explained in section 6.2, people's conceptions of tutor superordination were measured using pairs of items: one member of each pair referred to tutor behaviour, and the other to PG student behaviour. So I calculated the degree of asymmetry in the relationship by deducting the responses to the items describing PG student behaviour from the responses to the corresponding items describing tutor behaviour.

For each pair of items, both British and Chinese respondents rated tutors as being more likely to perform the behaviour than PG students. This indicates that all groups of respondents regarded tutors as being superordinate to PG students. Since the likelihood rating scale was a 7-point one, the maximum degree of asymmetry that could emerge for each pair was 6, and the minimum was 0.[10] The overall mean ratings (and standard deviations) that emerged are given in Table 2 below:

	British	Chinese
	2.163 (1.09)	3.106 (1.06)
	British	Chinese
Tutors	2.534 (1.07)	3.425 (.95)
PG Students	1.921 (1.04)	2.990 (1.08)

Table 2: Mean Ratings (and Standard Deviations) of Degree of Asymmetry in the Tutor - PG Student Relationship (Scale 0 - 6)

[9] Checks were carried out to ensure that analysis of variance was a valid test to use on the data.

[10] This range is based on the assumption that the tutor - postgraduate student relationship varies between equality and tutor superordination. Theoretically, the range could have been from 6 to 0 to -6 (tutor superordination - equality - PG student superordination).

These results are represented diagrammatically in Figure 2 below.

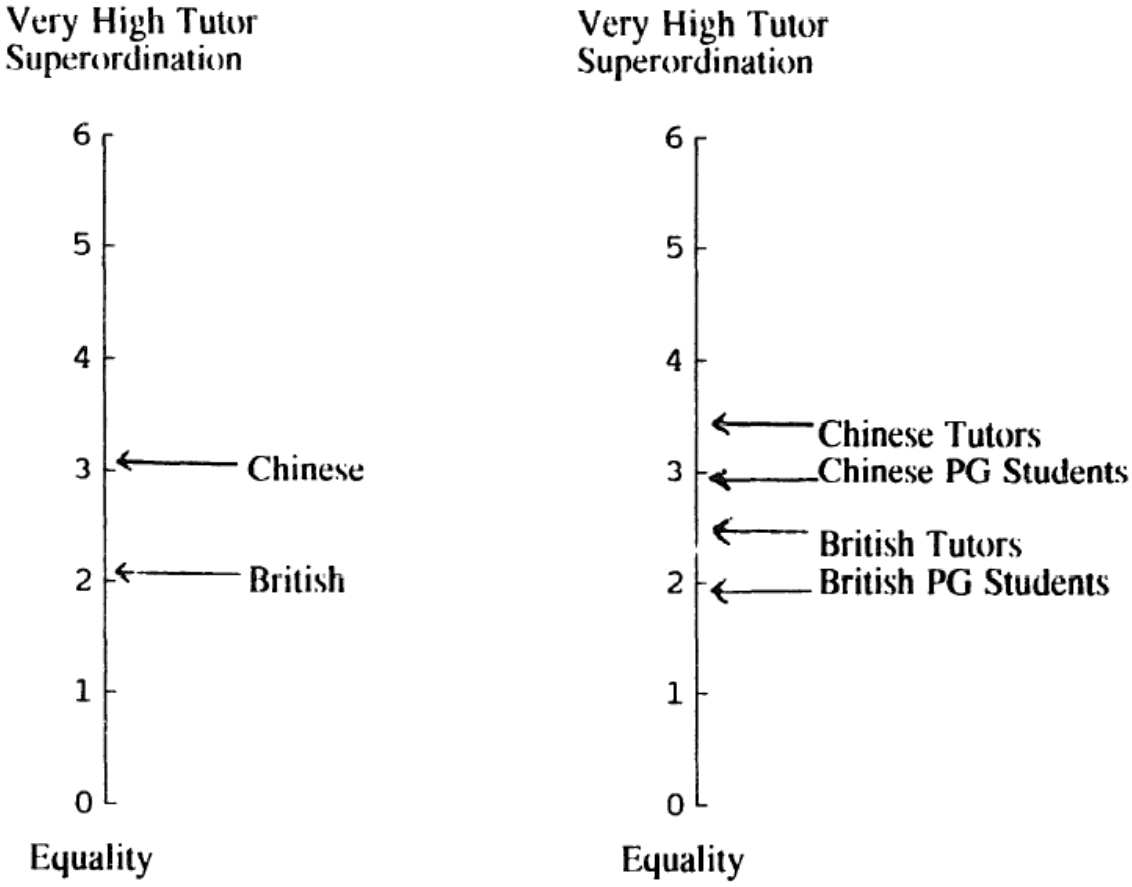


Figure 2: Conceptions of the Degree of Tutor Superordination

Analyses of variance of the results indicated that both nationality and role had statistically significant effects on the ratings, with 11% to 14% of the variance being attributable to nationality, and 5% to 7% attributable to role. (Factor Analysis Method: Nationality: F = 25.058, DF = 1,261, p = 0.000*, beta^2 = .11; Role: F = 7.165, DF = 1,261, p = 0.008*, beta^2 = .07. Summation Method: Nationality: F = 34.926, DF = 1,269, p = 0.000*, beta^2 = .14; Role: F = 5.711, DF = 1,269, p = 0.018*, beta^2 = .05). None of the other variables (field of speciality, age, or experience of living abroad) had a significant effect according to either procedure.

These results indicate that Chinese respondents conceived of tutors as being significantly more superordinate to PG students than British respondents did, and that tutors (irrespective of nationality) conceived there to be significantly greater asymmetry in the relationship than PG students did.

7.3 Conceptions of Social Distance/Closeness

As I explained in section 6.2, the questionnaire items probing social distance/closeness were rated twice by respondents: once for likelihood of occurrence, and once for the minimum degree of closeness required for the behaviour to be regarded as appropriate.

I used several different procedures to analyse the results. Some took both types of ratings into account; others investigated only the likelihood ratings. All of them yielded almost identical results, and so only one procedure is reported here. (See Spencer-Oatey, 1992, for full details of the different methods and their results.)

In one analytic procedure, I first considered the ratings of minimum degree of closeness required for the behaviour to be regarded as appropriate (items in section 3 of the questionnaire). I selected only those items that showed a mean nationality difference of less than 1 point, and that were also rated as requiring a relatively close relationship for the behaviour to be regarded as appropriate. There were 6 such items. The overall mean rating of these items was 4.095 (the scale ranged from 0 to 6; 0 = very distant; 6 = very close). I then used the likelihood ratings of these 6 items for my subsequent analyses.

In terms of likelihood of occurrence, the mean ratings (and standard deviations) were as follows:

	British	Chinese
	2.041 (1.11)	3.442 (1.20)
	British	Chinese
Tutors	2.457 (1.14)	3.905 (.97)
PG Students	1.760 (1.00)	3.273 (1.24)

Table 3: Mean Ratings (& Standard Deviations) of the Likelihood of `Close' Behaviour occurring between Tutors and PG Students (Scale 0 - 6: 0 = extremely unlikely, 6 = extremely likely)

These figures are represented diagrammatically in Figure 3 below:

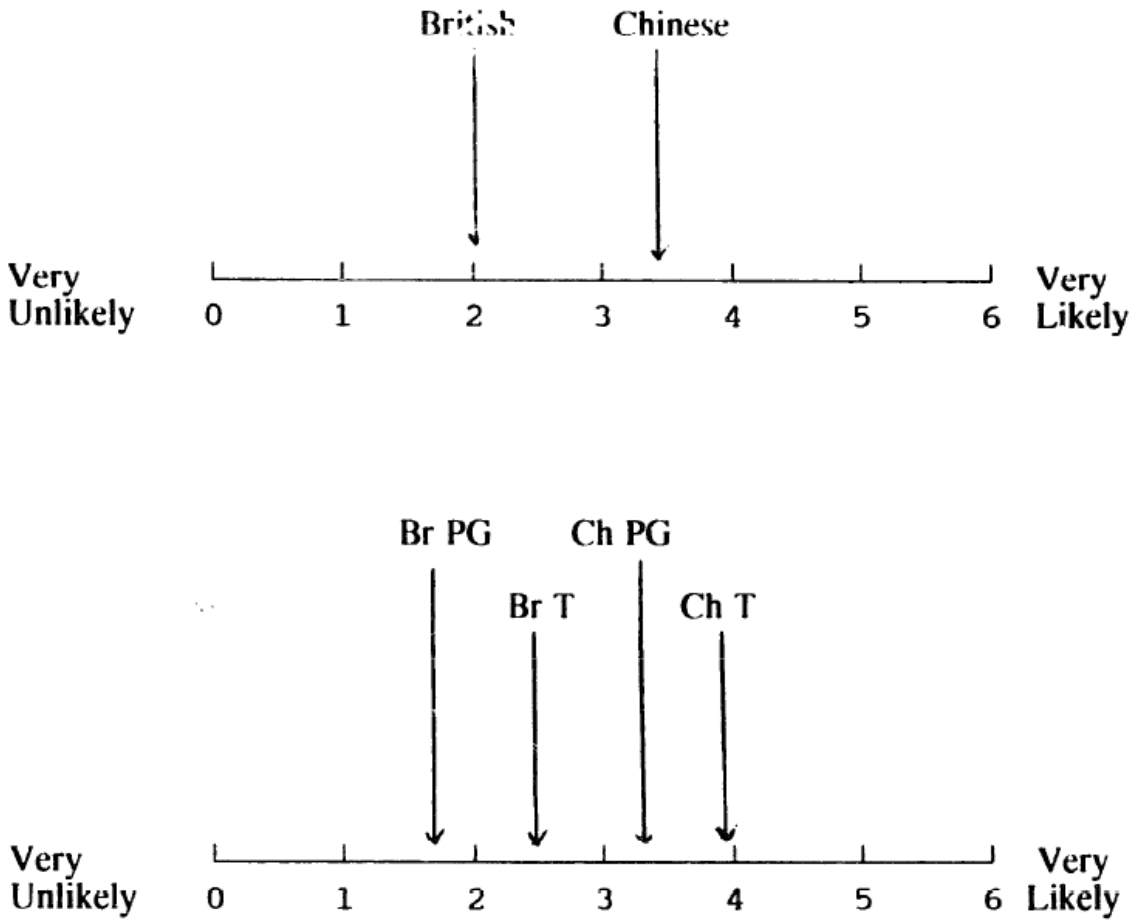


Figure 3: Conceptions of the Likelihood of `Close' Behaviour occurring between Tutors and PG Students

Analysis of variance of the results indicated that both nationality and role had statistically significant effects on the ratings, with 37% of the variance attributable to nationality, and 5% to role. (Nationality: F = 112.059, DF = 1,288, p = 0.000*, beta^2 = .37; Role: F = 6.242, DF = 1,288, p = 0.013*, beta^2 = .05.) None of the other variables (field of speciality, age, and experience of living abroad) had a significant effect.

These results indicate that Chinese respondents conceived of the tutor - PG student relationship as being very much closer than the British respondents did, and that tutors regarded it as closer than PG students did. The effect of role seems relatively minor, and unlikely to be practically meaningful. However, the effect of nationality is very large and consistent (the percentage of variance attributable to nationality was between .35 and .39 in all the different tests). Potentially, therefore, communicative interaction could be significantly affected by these nationality differences.

8. Discussion

The results of the investigation indicate that people's conceptions of a given role relationship may vary between nationality groups, and also that conceptions may be affected by the real-life role of the respondents. The implications of these findings are discussed in this section.

8.1 Practical Implications

Since British and Chinese academics have somewhat different conceptions of the typical tutor - PG student relationship, they are likely to have differing expectations regarding the relationship. Chinese people probably expect there to be a greater display of deference than British do, and yet may also expect the relationship to be closer and more personal. This has clear practical implications for interaction between British tutors and Chinese PG students, and between Chinese tutors and British PG students. (See Spencer-Oatey, 1992, for a detailed discussion of such practical implications.)

8.2 Theoretical Implications

There are also a number of theoretical implications associated with the results.

First, the findings show that people from a given socio-cultural group tend to have similar conceptualizations of a given role relationship, but that these norms and expectations may differ from one socio-cultural group to another. So when pragmaticists carry out cross-cultural research, it is essential that they consider this potential difference.

Unfortunately, as I mentioned above, many linguists have overlooked this point, and have simply implicitly assumed that all their subjects perceive the situational variables in similar ways. For example, Scarcella (1980), Rintell (1981), Trosberg (1987), Zimin (1981), Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), and Blum-Kulka (1987) all made this assumption. The present results indicate that it is invalid simply to make such an assumption, and that people's perceptions need to be checked.

Second, since it is so important to check people's assessments of situational variables, suitable ways need to be devised for measuring parameters such as power and distance. More detailed consideration needs to be given to the definition and scope of the dimensions (for example, whether distance is simply a question of degree of familiarity, or whether there is also an affective component). And if Likert-type scales are used for measuring the parameters, then the length and labelling of the scales needs to be decided carefully. For example, Olshtain (1989), in a cross-cultural study of apologies, used a three-point scale that was labelled as follows: *1 = strangers; 2 = acquaintances; 3 = friends*. This scale would not be long enough to identify any differences between British and Chinese conceptions of social distance/closeness in the tutor - PG student relationship, because point 2 (acquaintances) would be the most `accurate' choice for both nationality groups. So scales of three points or less, as used in studies reported in Blum-Kulka et al (1989), are unlikely to be suitable, because they may fail to identify genuine differences; scales with five or seven points are needed for more accurate assessments.

Third, the results have some tentative implications for Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) model of politeness. According to these authors, people's choice of linguistic strategies is influenced by the perceived level of face threat associated with conveying a given message to a given person. The authors maintain that three factors (two of which are power and distance) affect the level of face-threat that people perceive, and they maintain that these factors combine in an additive fashion. Several authors (e.g. Slugoski & Turnbull, 1988; Holtgraves & Yang, 1990) have questioned the suitability of an additive model, and the present findings also tentatively suggest that adjustments are needed to the model. When the present figures measuring social distance and tutor superordination are combined, the `weightiness' of the relationship is greater for the British than for the Chinese. This can be seen from Table 4 below:

	Tutor Superord.	Social Distance[11]	Overall Weightiness
British	2.163	3.959	6.122
Chinese	3.106	2.588	5.694

Table 4: Mean Measures of Degree of Tutor Superordination & Degree of Social Distance, and Overall Weightiness

In terms of Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) model, this means that (assuming the third determining factor is held constant), British PG students will tend to perceive the tutor - PG student relationship as more face-threatening than Chinese PG students, and that British PG students will thus tend to use more face-redressive or `polite' strategies than Chinese PG students. Although the present research did not explore the language used by the two nationality groups, intuitively this outcome seems extremely unlikely. Anecdotel evidence suggests the reverse, as do the stereotypes held by both nationality groups: both British and Chinese tutors and PG students seem to believe that, generally speaking, Chinese students pay more attention to face redress when interacting with tutors than British students do. So the present findings raise additional doubts regarding the suitability of Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) simple additive model.

Finally, Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), in their model of politeness, suggest that the more face-threatening a situation is, the more likely people are to use indirect strategies. So the present findings raise a general question: how large a difference in people's conceptions of social relations is needed before communicative interaction is affected? In the present study, the percentage of variance attributable to nationality was found to be 11% for tutor superordination, and 37% for social distance-closeness. Is the difference between British and Chinese conceptions of tutor superordination large enough to affect communicative interaction (assuming that both languages/cultures have similar associations between language use and this contextual variable), or would it need to be greater before language was affected? And what about social distance-closeness? Is that difference large enough to affect language use?

[11] These figures were originally calculated as measures of closeness. For application to Brown and Levinson's model, they need to be measures of distance, and so they have been reversed on the scale.

Answers to these kind of questions can only be speculative at present, and further research is clearly needed. However, without such answers, it is impossible to know whether statistical differences such as those found in the present study are practically meaningful in terms of language use.

9. Concluding Remarks

The results of the present study relate to only two nationalities (British and Chinese) and to one type of role relationship (tutor - PG student). Further research is clearly needed in order to establish whether other nationality groups also have different conceptualizations, and whether other types of role relationships are affected. Meanwhile, however, cross-cultural pragmatics researchers should take account of this potential for difference, and include assessment checks in their research design. Without this, their findings will be open to question.

References

Adamopoulos, J. (1982) The perception of interpersonal behavior. Dimensionality & importance of the social environment. *Environment & Behavior*, 14(1): 29-44.

Baxter, L.A. (1984) An investigation of compliance-gaining as politeness. *Human Communication Research*, 10(3): 427-456.

Beebe, L. M., & Takahashi, T. (1989). Do you have a bag?: social status and patterned variation in second language acquisition. In S. Gass, C. Madden, D. Preston, & L. Selinker (Eds.), *Variation in Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 103-125). Clevedon, Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters.

Benjamin, L.S. (1974) Structural analysis of social behavior. *Psychological Review*, 81(5): 392-425.

Blum-Kulka, S. (1987) Indirectness and politeness in requests: same or different? *Journal of Pragmatics*, 11: 131-146.

Blum-Kulka, S., Danet, B. & Gherson, R. (1985) The language of requesting in Israeli society. In J. Forgas (ed) *Language and Social Situations*. New York: Springer-Verlag. pp.113-139.

Blum-Kulka, S. & House, J. (1989) Cross-cultural and situational variation in requesting behavior. In S. Blum-Kulka et al (eds), pp.123-154.

Blum-Kulka, S., House, J. & Kasper, G. (eds) (1989) *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex.

Blum-Kulka, S. & Olshtain, E. (1984) Requests and Apologies. A Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP). *Applied Linguistics*, 5(3): 196-213.

Brislin, R.W. (1980) Translation and Content Analysis of Oral and Written Material. In H.C. Triandis & J.W. Berry (eds) *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology. Vol.2. Methodology.* Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Brown, P. & Fraser, C. (1979) Speech as a marker of situation. In K.R. Scherer & H. Giles (eds) *Social Markers in Speech*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp.33-62.

Brown, P. & Levinson, S. (1978, 1987) *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. First published in 1978 as part of E.N. Goody (ed) Questions and Politeness. Reissued 1987 with corrections, new introduction and new bibliography. Cambridge: CUP.

Brown, R. (1965) *Social Psychology*. 1st ed. London: Collier-Macmillan.

Brown, R. & Gilman, A. (1960) Pronouns of power and solidarity. In T.A. Sebeok (ed) *Style in Language*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Cansler, D. C., & Stiles, W. B. (1981). Relative status and interpersonal presumptuousness. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 17, 459-471.

Cody, M. J., & McLaughlin, M. L. (1980). Perceptions of compliance-gaining situations: a dimensional analysis. *Communication Monographs*, 47(2), 132-148.

Davidson, A. R., Jaccard, J. J., Triandis, H. C., Morales, M. L., & Diaz-Guerrero, R. (1976). Cross-cultural model testing: toward a solution of the etic-emic dilemma. *International Journal of Psychology*, 11(1), 1-13.

Forgas, J. P., & Bond, M. H. (1985). Cultural influences on the perception of interaction episodes. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 11(1), 75-88.

Hays, R.B. (1984) The development and maintenance of friendship. *Journal of Social & Personal Relationships*, 1: 75-98.

Hill, B., Ide, S., Ikuta, S., Kawasaki, A. & Ogino, T. (1986) Universals of linguistic politeness. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 10: 347-371.

Holmes, J. (1990). Apologies in New Zealand English. *Language in Society*, 19, 155-199.

Holtgraves, T. (1986). Language structure in social interaction: perceptions of direct and indirect speech acts and interactants who use them. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 51(2), 305-313.

Holtgraves, T., Srull, T. K., & Socall, D. (1989). Conversation memory: the effects of speaker status on memory for the assertiveness of conversation remarks. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56(2), 149-160.

Holtgraves, T. & Yang, J-N. (1990) Politeness as universal: cross-cultural perceptions of request strategies and inferences based on their use. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 59(4): 719-729.

Hudson, R.A. (1980) *Sociolinguistics*. Cambridge: CUP.

Hymes, D.H. (1974) *Foundations in Sociolinguistics: An Ethnographic Approach*. Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennslyvania Press.

Kasper, G. (1990) Linguistic politeness - current research issues. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 14(2): 193-218.

Leech, G. (1983) *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.

Lim, T. S., & Bowers, J. W. (1991). Facework, solidarity, approbation, and tact. *Human Communication Research*, 17(3), 415-450.

Olshtain, E. (1989) Apologies across languages. In S. Blum-Kulka et al (eds), pp.155-173.

Rintell, E. (1981). Sociolinguistic variation and pragmatic ability: a look at learners. In J. Walters (Eds.), *The Sociolinguistics of Deference and Politeness. Special issue of the International Journal of the Sociology of Language, 27* (pp. 11-34). The Hague: Mouton.

Scarcella, R. (1980) On speaking politely in a second language. In C. Yorio, K. Perkins, & J. Schachter (eds) *The Learner in Focus: the Issue of the Decade*. (On TESOL 1979) Washington, D.C.: TESOL.

Slugoski, B., & Turnbull, W. (1988). Cruel to be kind and kind to be cruel: sarcasm, banter, and social relations. *Journal of Language & Social Psychology*, 7, 101-121.

Spencer-Oatey, H. (1992) Cross-Cultural Politeness: British and Chinese conceptions of the tutor-student relationship. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Lancaster University.

Stern, H.H. (1983) *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Triandis, H.C., Vassiliou, V. & Nassiakou, M. (1968) Three cross-cultural studies of subjective culture. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, *Monograph Supplement*, 8(4): 1-42.

Trosberg, A. (1987) Apology strategies in natives/non-natives. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 11: 147-167.

Vollmer, H.J. & Olshtain, E. (1989) The language of apologies in German. In S. Blum-Kulka et al (eds), pp.197-218.

Wierzbicka, A. (1991). *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics. The Semantics of Human Interaction*. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Wood, L. A., & Kroger, R. O. (1991). Politeness and forms of address. *Journal of Language & Social Psychology*, 10(3), 145-168.

Zimin, S. (1981) Sex and politeness: factors in first- and second-language use. In J. Walters (ed) *The Sociolinguistics of Deference and Politeness*. Special Issue of the International Journal of the Sociology of Language, 27. The Hague: Mouton.